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MARILYN & BOBBY

Intended as entertainment, not fact, film still draws ire

By Ray Richmond
Daily News Television Writer

John Siegenthaler expected the worst, and he got it when he flipped a tape of the film "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair."

The man who had served as Robert F. Kennedy's administrative assistant during his days as U.S. attorney general in 1961 and '62 and was a close friend of the Kennedy family for a dozen years had heard the buzz of the film airing at 10 tonight on the USA Network.

According to the buzz, the film not only linked RFK in a torrid love affair with Marilyn Monroe during the last months of her life but also placed him in the room when she died suddenly in 1962. It even insinuated that he somehow may have aided in her suicide.

So Siegenthaler, greatly curious, asked for and received an advance copy of the movie and watched it with great disgust.

"I think I know a lot more about Bobby and his life than the writer and director and producer and either of the lead actors," said Siegenthaler, who retired last year as editor and

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■ Review of "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair."

Melody Anderson and James F. Kelly portray Marilyn Monroe and Robert F. Kennedy, top.

Bobby

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publisher of the Nashville Tennessean.

"What I think from watching it is that it's a rape of history and a tragic rip-off of young people who will see it and believe that fiction is fact."

Not one to mince words, Siegenthaler added in a telephone interview that "the members of Robert Kennedy's family and his friends have been wounded enough by the bullets of an assassin, and they should not have to be wounded in this way by the USA Network."

If the USA Network, indeed, is playing fast and loose with history, it at least covers itself in the film by carefully labeling it "a fictional account inspired by the public lives of Marilyn Monroe and Robert F. Kennedy" in the opening credits and calling it "a blend of fiction and speculative journalism" in a press release.

"Marilyn & Bobby's" executive producer, Barry Weitz, makes no apologies for the film and doesn't believe anyone stepped over the line of responsibility.

"We feel we covered ourselves and tried to create an interesting fiction around their two lives," said Weitz in the film's defense while speaking three weeks ago to the TV press.

"I really do think we tried to go the high road here. It's done strictly as entertainment, not as anything approaching a documentary. We were only presenting these events as possibilities, never as fact."

Asked if he was in fact merely "creating a history that doesn't exist," Weitz replied, "Well, do you know that it doesn't exist?"

Professor Jim Hilty, chairman of the history department at Temple University in Philadelphia and a longtime Kennedy historian presently writing a book on RFK's life and times, doesn't think it exists.

"The characterization of the sexual relationship between Kennedy and Monroe is basically a hoax," said Hilty by telephone.

"It would have been highly uncharacteristic for Bobby Kennedy to have conducted an affair at that time, particularly given his main role in the family and with the U.S. government and what he knew the FBI had linking (President John F. Kennedy) to Judith Campbell.

"Based on all of the evidence, if they had a hot and heavy romance, it would have had to occur in its entirety between May 29 and June 13, 1962. But the chronology is all wrong. It just doesn't fit."

Hilty also has plenty of doubts that RFK could have been in Los Angeles and in the room with Monroe on the night of her death.

"John Bates swears that Kennedy was at his ranch in Gilroy (Calif.) all day and evening on Aug. 4 of '62. The ranch foreman will also attest to it."

If you get the idea that "Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair" arrives on the small screen tonight shrouded in controversy, you are correct. It's easily the most visible — and, at the same time, vilified — project with which the USA Network ever has been involved.

Weitz and lead actors James F. Kelly and Melody Anderson were criticized three weeks ago by a group of television press members gathered at the Universal Hilton Hotel.

It was a verbal assault the likes of which even the media veterans never had seen. The principals were more or less crucified for perpetrating a fraud on the American public, a piece of mythic sleaze being fed viewers as entertainment.

Author Donald Spoto, whose book "Marilyn Monroe: The Biography" recently was published and already is an international best

seller, doesn't much care how the USA Network labels "Marilyn & Bobby" or the principals defend the film.

As Spoto wrote in an article in the current issue of TV Guide, "It's all mere conjecture, without a grain of truth or accuracy."

Weitz naturally takes exception with that view, reasoning that his project is being singled out unfairly because Robert Kennedy is the lone remaining sacred cow in the Kennedy family.

"Clearly, you would all accept the fact that Joe Kennedy was a certain kind of person," said Weitz, "that Ted Kennedy was another type of person, Jack was another. But Bobby Kennedy seems to ring in your minds in a wholly different way."

Sid Feders doesn't quite see it that way.

Feders served as executive producer of a two-hour NBC News documentary on RFK that aired to coincide with the 25th anniversary of his death in June. And while he received unprecedented cooperation from the Kennedy family for the project, neither did he have an agenda to do a whitewash and uphold the pristine Bobby Kennedy image.

"We did look into Bobby and Marilyn and tried to find evidence that would prove a connection, a sexual relationship," recalled Feders. "But we couldn't. There was just nothing there. So we didn't report on it.

"We had no mandate to perpetuate this image of Bobby being a hero or larger than life. We did report extensively on his reputation for being ruthless, for instance. But any of the Marilyn stuff was just speculation, and remains so."

The point Feders makes is that if there were anything provable to link Kennedy and Monroe, you would think it would have come out by now — a quarter-century after the man's death.

"I just personally don't believe it's true, and I have no vested interest in the Kennedy legacy," said Feders.

"Do I think Bobby Kennedy was the most pristine character in the world? No. He was ruthless and a steamroller. He was the toughest of the Kennedy boys, to be sure. But there is not a scintilla of evidence to place him with Marilyn Monroe. Period."

For his part, Weitz doesn't much care what anyone says because "this is entertainment we're talking about, not biography.

"We never take the point of view that what we're saying is factual. It's just an interesting story that has possibilities created in history. I don't see anything shameful about that."